

Zoology Immersion: A Documentary in Learning

**An Honors Thesis Creative Project
(HONRS499)**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gary Dodson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

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Abstract

This Honors thesis creative project is a video that features the activities of the Zoology Immersion (BIO420) course during the spring semester of 2008. This video emphasizes the unique learning processes of immersion coursework, and is told through a series of interviews with students, advisors, and zoo personnel. I was a student in this course while shooting the video. The video was edited during the fall of 2008, and will be housed within the Ball State University Biology website.

Acknowledgments

- I would like to thank Dr. Gary Dodson for his guidance and passion for teaching. His perspective and feedback were essential in the creation of this project.
- I would like to thank all those at the Ball State University Teleplex including Mary Booher-Sipes and Bill Bryant for help with everything from renting cameras to video production advice.
- I would like to thank Cheryl Piropato, Jim Anderson, and the staff of the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo for their interviews and cooperation.
- I would like to thank the Ball State Honors College for the opportunity to undertake such a unique and challenging project.
- Finally, I would like to thank the rest of the students in BIO420 for their hard work, patience, and dedication to the projects. Without their excellence, this video would not be possible.

Introduction

When I began thinking of a topic for my senior honors project, I often asked myself, “what would represent your time at Ball State and what you have learned?” I realized that the guidelines suggesting that the project be the crowning achievement of your skills and knowledge most likely referred to technical skills that I had been taught or discipline-specific knowledge from my department. I have most definitely been influenced by my experiences at Ball State. The most important information in my mind is not what I have learned, but the methods in which I’ve learned it. Learning to approach ideas in an adaptable manner has been my crowning achievement. This is the method that has allowed me to best learn, experience, and practice the skills and principles of my major: zoology. As in all the fields of biology, the information required to excel is constantly shifting as hypotheses are tested and technologies progress. It is valuable to force yourself to adapt by applying methods from outside one's area to convey a clear story about your own discipline, but even more valuable is the ability to force yourself to adapt and apply new ideas to established methods. This is the question I considered regarding the task of creating a senior thesis project within the Honors College: How do I show the best of what I’ve learned while adapting to a novel approach?

The answer took me six months to find in the form of the immersion initiative at Ball State. A zoology immersion course was being offered for the first time, and I was ready to explore a new kind of learning. The course was billed to be a hands-on experience working closely with Fort Wayne Zoo staff to develop projects to improve the zoo. I knew that this immersion experience would be the foundation of an honors thesis project, but simply writing a paper would not do. I wanted to approach a new idea for learning coursework with a new idea for expressing my own learning.

I decided that I must make a documentary. It seemed like a bizarre choice due to the fact that I had very little knowledge in this area, in fact, I had barely spent any time behind the viewfinder of any video camera my entire life. In my mind however, this was the point. If I wanted to document the experience of a newly established method of teaching at Ball State, then I felt the need to do it in such a way that would force me to learn and adapt to a new medium.

A month later I found myself lugging 35 pounds of camera equipment everywhere I went, constantly asking questions to staff in the telecommunications department, and scheduling meetings with classmates in order to get interviews on camera. This was all combined with the fact that I was at the same time a student in the course carrying out my responsibilities. Students often get opportunities for experiences that transform the path of their career or their perspective, but it is not often to have two of these experiences stacked on top of one another.

About the Zoology Immersion Experience

Zoology Immersion is a course that gives biology students a chance to go behind the scenes of a successful zoo and work with the staff to develop projects that benefit the zoo. Students in Zoology Immersion are expected to utilize Ball State’s resources to

develop projects based on the needs of the zoo, propose them to zoo staff, and implement the projects in a semester's time. The class is largely student driven with Dr. Gary Dodson acting as a supervisor and mentor. Part of the semester is spent taking trips to other zoos in the Midwest to research the ins and outs of how a zoo works, and to gather ideas that could improve Ball State's zoo partner, the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo.

In the spring semester of 2008, 11 students including myself were the first class to enroll in zoology immersion. Our class formed three groups that worked on two sets of projects. One major project was the creation of two videos that would enhance the display areas of the orangutans and the jellyfish. The orangutan video detailed the training activities that the primate trainers engage the orangutans in daily. The orangutans can often be seen facing their training door during visitor hours, and this video explained to zoo guests what the orangutans were doing and how their training behaviors were essential to keeping the animals healthy. The Jellyfish display video detailed the interesting process of how the jellyfish are fed and maintained by the aquarium staff. Both groups working on these projects met with staff from the telecommunications department to learn videography techniques as well as staff from computing services and the VIA production lab to be instructed on the basics of video editing and production. The orangutan video was put on display in early summer of 2008, and both videos were featured on the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo website later in the summer. Both of these web versions were very successful. Based on year-end website statistics, the orangutan training video garnered 3,028 views and the Jellyfish feeding video was viewed 2,492 times.

The third group spent their semester developing a future plan for the Fort Wayne Zoo's system of directional signs. The zoo's signage is a future area of remodeling for the zoo, and one group of students carried out research using survey methods combined with comparing the efficiency of different zoo signage models. This report and presentation gave the zoo a valuable resource when they move into the design phase of their signage projects.

All the projects forced the students to learn new techniques and skills that were outside of their expertise. Most students had no videography experience and met the challenge of learning to use professional video equipment and editing software. For the signage report, extensive research was needed to find the correct survey methods and determine sign efficiency. While working on these projects, all the students had opportunities to individually spend time working at the zoo in different areas. Students worked in zoo areas ranging from the African house to the Veterinary hospital. These internship experiences let the students experience working at the zoo in areas where they were most interested.

Pre-Production

I approached Dr. Gary Dodson in January of 2008 to discuss possible Honors thesis project ideas that involved the Zoology Immersion course. I had an interest in the developing video projects, and we together decided to pursue a short documentary about the classes' progress. The process of filming for the video started on a learn-as-I-go basis. The class was fortunate to be able to get a tutorial from the University Teleplex's

Bill Bryant on the use of the Sony PD-150 video cameras. Our sessions with Mr. Bryant were essential for the class members who were planning on committing to video projects for the zoo and doubly useful for my own purposes. The camera was with me during all trips to the Fort Wayne Zoo and during most of our class and group meetings. I also scheduled times during the semester in which I asked willing students in the class to be interviewed on camera for the purpose of the video. I asked them many questions about their personal experience in the class, their frustrations and successes, and their thoughts regarding the value of immersion learning. As the semester went on, my knowledge grew from communicating with Teleplex staff and my techniques became more refined. I knew that this would present a challenge in the final video when trying to keep my mistakes from distracting viewers.

After the semester was over, my task for the Fall semester 2008 was to go through the many tapes of footage and narrow down what video would be in the final product. I had recorded over 13 hours of footage that needed to be edited. After discussing where the project was heading with Dr. Dodson, we agreed that the goal would be to create a short mini-documentary that could be shown to prospective students as well as other Ball State faculty and departments that would showcase an example of immersion learning. The video would need to explain the class's goals, the relationship between Ball State and the University, and the experience of the students. All of this needed to be smoothly explained by the footage I had already gathered, so the I approached the editing process with the attitude of letting what I had captured steer the tone of the video.

Video Editing, Analysis, and Final Result

This short documentary went through several edits from October 2008 – March 2009. The first step was to decide what footage to keep and what footage would be deleted. I isolated all of my interviews and made selections as to what sections would fit the video best. It was necessary to explain the origin of the course and the role of the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo. This was best achieved through the interviews of the course's advisor, Dr. Gary Dodson, and the Zoo's Director, Jim Anderson. I then wanted to base the rest of the video on the roles of the students, the value of the class to the students, and the projects themselves. After finding enough interview footage to properly explain these ideas, I placed the interviews together in a timeline to get an idea of length. My next task was to narrow down the speakers to what was necessary and add B-roll footage. B-roll footage is the video scenes that are overlaid while the interviewees or narrator is speaking. This footage gives examples and acts out what the speaker is saying to add believability and interest to the work. Fortunately I had captured a plethora of footage of my class planning during meetings, visiting the zoos, taking group trips, interacting with the animals, and talking to zoo staff. I wanted to focus on scenes that depicted the students doing things that would seem impossible in a standard class (e.g. petting a giraffe). Fine tuning the particulars of what clip was used was a time consuming process.

During this process, it was decided that the video would be hosted within the Ball State University web site as a linked page that described the course and my project. This allowed me to focus on limiting the length of the video by cutting the material down to the most important explanations. The goal was to convey the history, goals, meaning,

and results of the class in an approximately three minute video. After most of the edits had been made and a final version was produced that Dr. Dodson and I agreed on, I added the two class-made videos to the credits sequence in order to give those that were interested an example of the product that came from the students.

The final edits were made in mid-March, and shortly after a copy was handed over to James Whiteman, the Digital Media Technology Coordinator at the Ball State University Teleplex. Mr. Whiteman used his authority to take the video from its native form and make it available on a Ball State server for public access. An unexpected highlight in the process was the featured use of the documentary in a showcase of a few immersive learning courses hosted by the Dean of the College of Science and Humanities.

Challenges

The most obvious challenge that had to be overcome for this project was my lack of experience in videography and video editing. Fortunately, because of the classes' interest of tackling projects using video, I was able to learn from the professionals within the Ball State Teleplex. I quickly went beyond the basic knowledge of video camera operation and into the techniques that would produce a high quality product. My shooting became more efficient as the semester wore on as I learned about proper lighting, how to get the best sound, and how to best frame scenes on the screen. These lessons came first hand from the many emails sent to Producer/Director Bill Bryant. His advice always steered me in the right direction and allowed me to take increasingly better video. Using the editing software was a more difficult task that required extensive training and many hours. I had to first become acquainted with the use of Apple computers and then with the complicated editing software in the VIA computer lab. I edited the project using Adobe Premiere Pro, and exclusively used the Apple computers for all rendering.

Video Outline and Transcript

Opening: group picture of class with title.

Dr. Gary Dodson, class advisor: "I wanted to have a group internship. Somehow, a group of students could do something that individually would be something that would be tough for them to achieve. And the critical aspect of that was to have a partner, to have a zoo partner.

Jim Anderson, Fort Wayne Children's Zoo Director: "I look at BSU as having resources, talent, knowledge, financial or material resources, that you all have stated some sort of willingness to apply to this environment.

Dr. Gary Dodson: "So it was the perfect time to say, you know what, I'm willing to start a new course that would be an immersive learning experience, a way that students would

do something beyond lecture and even laboratory, standard lecture and laboratory situations, and get the opportunity to be very hands on, to be very much in charge of what they end up getting out of the course. That's what we are calling immersive learning. That is a part of what we are calling immersive learning.

Shannon Anderson, student: "So that is really valuable because that gives me an idea if that is something I really want to do, and also, you know if I do get an internship or if I do get a job, that way I don't go in there and say that this isn't anything what I thought it was going to be, I'm really surprised. This way I at least have some sort of an idea of what's going to happen when I get there; it's not a total shock."

Dr. Gary Dodson: "...working in groups, having very few boundaries as to what we thing we'd like to do with the course, very student driven. So that's happening, and Ball State is facilitating that, as is my college and my department.

Alicia Brantley: "I mean we're pretty much running the show ourselves. Dr. Dodson has his input and Dr. Carter has his input, and if we need direction they're there for it, but these ideas are our ideas and we're the ones doing it and the ones in contact with everybody"

Devin Baier, Student: "We ended up with one video in the aquarium with the possibility of another, one video for the orangutans, and then doing some signage and wayfinding research for the zoo so they can use it later."

Cheryl Piropto, Fort Wayne Children's Zoo Education Director: "One of the things that I appreciated was the open-mindedness of Dr. Dodson and the students. They could have very easily said this is not the way we thought it was going to be or we insist that we must follow this course. But really everyone was willing to let the project evolve and turn into something that would benefit both parties."

Alicia Brantley: "We got to experience things, do out and do things, and that's how we learned, learned it hands-on. And I don't know if that makes it more valuable but it makes it valuable in a different way."

Shannon Anderson: "We are going to achieve something. We are going to have something were we say look I did that. You know, I think that will mean more than me than saying oh look I got an A in this class."

Cheryl Piropto: "Working with the students was a great experience. A lot of very talented students, a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of passion for learning and you can't beat that. When you've got a group that wants to learn and wants to gain experience, I really don't you can go wrong with that.